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### TIME FOR THE RICH TO ERASE PROOF OF CLIMATE NEGLECT?

By  
Gwynne Dyer

Donald Trump's speech to the World Economic Forum in Davos on Monday contained no surprises: half an hour of chest-thumping self-praise, although without the usual xenophobia and dog-whistle racism. It was, after all, an audience of the ultra-rich and powerful in which most of the movers and shakers were not American.

There was no point in insulting them, and he didn't. Presumably for the same reason, he downplayed his climate denial at a conference whose theme this year is sustainability: just two minutes denouncing climate scientists as "the heirs of yesterday's foolish fortune tellers", and then back to boasting. But you can't help but wonder what everyone was thinking.

Most of them are owners or managers of businesses with a global reach, and their views on economic issues chimed with Mr Trump's. In the past, they echoed his views on climate change because taking it seriously threatened their business, but they are not stupid.

Some of them always knew the science was right, and just muddied the waters to win a few more decades of profit. Others believed for a while that it was a Chinese-backed hoax, but they know it's not the Chinese who are melting glaciers and setting Australia on fire.

So a majority of the people in that audience now realise that the climate threat is very real, and some are starting to take serious action against it. One of the world's three biggest asset-management firms, BlackRock, has just started pulling its investments out of the coal industry. It's a small start, and it's very late, maybe too late, but the wind is clearly changing.

Over the past months Goldman Sachs, Liberty Mutual, and The Hartford Financial Services Group, Inc, have all taken similar steps. The European Investment Bank announced that it will stop lending to fossil-fuel projects. But beyond wondering, a lot of the CEOs at Davos will be asking themselves: is it time to start shredding the evidence?

I am speaking metaphorically, of course. There are still megatonnes of paper documents that contain incriminating material about how companies subsidised climate denial campaigns in the past, but much of it was 'restricted circulation' and never saw a photocopier. Just call in the shredders. But the real problem is the electronic evidence.

The most damning evidence for how Boeing slid the now grounded 737 MAX past the FAA regulators is not the official documents but the internal email chat about the plane that Boeing has now had to release. "This airplane is designed by clowns who in turn are supervised by monkeys," said one. "I still haven't been forgiven by God for the covering up I did last year," said another.

There will be metaphorical tons of damning internal email chatter about how a great many companies conspired to cast doubt on the scientific evidence for global warming over a period of several decades. Tracking it down and killing it will be very hard.

People do what they have to make a living. Many people who profoundly disapproved of what the guilty companies were doing nevertheless took on jobs given to them and kept their mouths shut. But a few of them, at least, will have been quietly saving documents and emails for the day when the lawsuits start.

In fact, the class-action lawsuits are already getting underway, especially in the world's most litigious country, the US. It's unexplored legal territory, and it may be time before one of the cases makes it in court, but the model everybody has in mind is the Tobacco Master Settlement of 1998, in which the four major cigarette companies ended up paying out US\$206 billion (6.2 trillion baht) over 25 years.

They were also legally obliged to stop advertising aimed at young people, limit their lobbying, and fund anti-smoking campaigns. That was a case where the main victims were people who actually used their products. The public pressure to punish companies whose activities have harmed everybody's future will be far greater: if new and retrospective legislation is required, it will be passed.

In this case, we are not talking about fines. We are also talking about criminal liability. Even if we finally start taking serious measures against global warming now, a lot of people are going to die from the damage that has already been done: millions at least, and possibly a great many more than that.

But enough people will die in the rich countries that those who led or financed the denial campaign will almost certainly end up facing criminal charges ten or twenty years from now. Time to get shredding.

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